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AUTHOR Bender, Carl M.; Cockriel, Irvin W.
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ABSTRACT

The use of a stratified sampling procedure for conducting market surveys by alumni associations is discussed. A market survey with a 76.8 percent response rate is used to illustrate the potential success of the procedure, which can be implemented by alumni associations with computerized record systems. At the University of Missouri, Columbia, the market survey was used to obtain member input concerning the various programs and activities sponsored by the alumni association. The direct mail opinion survey solicited views about the university, opinions about the alumni association, and demographic information. A total of 1,743 questionnaires were mailed to a stratified random sample of alumni association members by academic divisions, and responses were obtained from 1,338 members. Survey results established a measurable database to support future programmatic choices made by the alumni association. Reasons for using a mail questionnaire, development and pretesting of the questionnaire, procedures to reach respondents, and the sampling design are briefly described. (SW)

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CONDUCTING AN ALUMNI MARKET SURVEY

BY

CARL M. BENDER
Assistant Director
Alumni Relations
University of Missouri-Columbia

IRVIN W. COCKRIEL
Associate Professor
Higher and Adult Education
University of Missouri-Columbia

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CONDUCTING AN ALUMNI MARKET SURVEY

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the use of a stratified sampling procedure that is easily adopted for conducting market surveys by alumni associations. A market survey with a 76.8 percent response rate is used to illustrate the potential success of the procedure. Alumni associations with computerized record systems interested in conducting market surveys should find implementation of this procedure manageable.

CONDUCTING AN ALUMNI MARKET SURVEY

Planning programs and activities to enhance and promote alumni organizations is mandatory. Examples in the literature of research attempts in this area are often cited with inadequate sample size to generalize to the total alumni population to ensure program success. Vibrant alumni organizations maintain on-going program evaluations (Smith, 1982; Zagoren, 1981). This article addresses the use of a stratified sampling procedure that is easily adopted for conducting market surveys and program evaluations by alumni associations.

In fiscal year 1982-83, the University of Missouri-Columbia (UMC) Alumni Association conducted a market survey. The purpose of this market survey was to obtain Alumni Association member input regarding the programs the Association sponsors, and to determine what alumni think their Association should/shoul'n't sponsor. Results of the survey established a measurable data base to support future programmatic choices made by the UMC Alumni Association. Additionally, the data analyses enabled the Alumni Association to evaluate existing programs, identify potential major donors to the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Methodology

The method used to obtain the desired information was the direct mail opinion survey. The decision to use a mail questionnaire was based on the following factors:

1. It was determined that a mail survey was the most cost effective procedure for obtaining the desired input from a large enough sample to provide representative results from all academic divisions.
2. The mail survey technique allows for random selection of samples across predetermined variables such as geographic location, academic division, etc.
3. The continuous updating of alumni records allowed for generating address labels in a convenient cost-effective manner.

4. The personnel available to implement a market analysis dictated a direct mail procedure.

The survey instrument solicited three types of information:

(1) opinions about the University of Missouri-Columbia, (2) opinions about the UMC Alumni Association, and (3) demographic information. All Big 8 and Big 10 alumni associations were contacted by phone to request information concerning existing market analysis procedures currently used. Those associations using direct mail surveys were requested to share a copy for the purpose of generating questions that might fit the intended objectives of this study. The majority of questions (68 of 73 potential responses) were closed-ended. Five questions were open-ended and a "COMMENTS" section was included at the end of the survey to provide respondents the opportunity to elaborate on any topic(s) they felt relevant.

The questionnaire was pretested among UMC Alumni Relations and Development Fund professional staff. Several meetings were conducted to discuss question content, wording and the appropriateness of the questions for the objectives of the study. This resulted in several alterations in question order, number of questions asked, length of instrument, wording, and answer categories.

Questionnaires were mailed first class in University of Missouri-Columbia Alumni Association envelopes with a cover letter on Association letterhead signed by the national association president. Identification numbers placed in the upper right hand corner on the front page of each questionnaire allowed easy differentiation between member returns from separate divisions. A postage paid return envelope, and, to encourage returns, a Missouri Alumni decal were also enclosed.

The cover letter briefly outlined the purpose of the survey and assured respondents that all answers would be kept strictly confidential and used only for program evaluation and planning.

A reminder post card, emphasizing the importance of completing and returning the survey, was mailed first class six days after the initial questionnaire. Two weeks later, a second questionnaire was sent to nonrespondents to the first mailing. This final mailing was also sent first class with a cover letter and a postage paid return envelope. A Missouri decal was not included.

Sampling Design

The sample of respondents included all geographic regions and time periods, except foreign addresses which were eliminated. To assure an appropriate sample size, the selection process included the number of respondents chosen from a particular academic division to that division's percentage of the total number of active members in the UMC Alumni Association (Tuckman, 1978; Gay, 1976). For example, if the College of Agriculture accounted for 10 percent of the Alumni Association's total membership, its alumni would then represent 10 percent of the sample selected to participate in the study, and so on for each academic division.

A total of 1743 questionnaires were mailed to a systematic stratified random sample of Alumni Association members by academic divisions. The 1743 members surveyed represents 10 percent of the total membership of the Alumni Association for which divisional codes are maintained, and can be considered adequate in size for a descriptive study of this nature (Gay, 1976). Of the 1743 alumni members surveyed, the response rate was 76.8 percent (1338 returns).

Analysis

All data were keypunched directly from questionnaires into the University's computer using master code sheets as guides. Services of UMC computer and keypunch staff were used to establish the necessary data sets. The data were analyzed using subprograms of the Statistical Analysis System (SAS Institute, 1982).

SUMMARY

The purpose of the Market Survey was to obtain member input concerning the various programs and activities the UMC Alumni Association sponsors. The results are now being used by the long range planning committee to help it formulate recommendations concerning the Association's future programming. Summary results ranking all Alumni Association programs and activities were published in the Missouri Alumnus magazine. Throughout the survey, this was a common thread: strong support for programs that provided tangible support for the University of Missouri-Columbia.

The procedure employed in the sample selection process (i.e., systematic stratafied randomization) is consistent with accepted survey research methods and enhances the internal validity and reliability of the study. It is a procedure that is easily adaptable to Alumni Associations with automated alumni record systems. The ease of sample selection encourages the implementation of this approach by other Alumni Associations interested in conducting studies of a similar nature.

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